

News Bulletin

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Hill Panel to Disclose Criticism of Intelligence on Central America

The House intelligence committee voted at a closed-door session yesterday to brush aside objections from the CIA and other U.S. intelligence agencies and make public a staff report critical of those agencies' performance in Central America in recent years.

The report, scheduled for release today, was heavily edited to tone down several criticisms and satisfy complaints of intelligence agency backers on the committee. For example, the phrase "rightist violence" was changed to "terrorist violence" several times in reference to the weakness of reporting on rightist violence from El Salvador.

A draft copy, reflecting the editing, was obtained by The Washington Post.

The study was commissioned months ago by Rep. Charlie Rose (D-N.C.), chairman of the subcommittee on oversight and evaluation. He told a reporter yesterday that the National Security Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency and the CIA had opposed public release.

"They felt it should be a confidential slap on the wrist," Rose said. "I felt strongly otherwise. It's important that the public know our committee is not afraid to go public with criticism even though that criticism may not be pleasant for the intelligence community."

The 47-page draft covers intelligence reports and assessments during the Carter and Reagan administrations and raises repeated questions about instances in which administration policies may have had skewed intelligence gathering.

"The basic concern is that tendentious rhetoric, including occasional oversimplification and misstatement, can drive out some of the needed collection and analysis," the study concludes. The study repeatedly emphasizes what the committee staff described as the high quality of most intelligence reporting from Central America. But the staff said that it wanted to "sound an early note of concern about the larger costs that might be incurred by the particular kinds of weaknesses" found. Shortcomings included:

- A major intelligence briefing for the committee last March 4 on outside communist support for the Salvadoran insurgency was "flawed by several instances of overstatement and overinterpretation."

At one point, the committee was told that "lots of ships have been traced" from the Soviet Union to unloading points in Nicaragua, but a later, written response conceded that "only a small number had actually been tracked all along the route."

- A slide at the same briefing on "guerrilla financing" indicated that Salvadoran guerrillas were receiving about \$17 million a year in addition to weapons, but the calculation was an extrapolation "based on a single piece of evidence indicating the monthly budget for the commander of one faction on one front."

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On closer questioning, the committee was told that the \$17 million figure was "not an estimate" but intended "only to indicate that 'relatively large sums of currency' were going to the guerrillas."

- Assurances by a CIA official last February that Salvadoran authorities had made much progress in reducing acts of violence by their forces turned out, on further committee inquiry, to have been based solely on statements from the Salvadoran Defense Ministry about disciplinary actions for infractions such as drunkenness and thievery.

A four-page section of the draft report said the intelligence community had denounced a Washington Post report Feb. 14 about a bloody Salvadoran military sweep operation as "propaganda" by a writer traveling with a guerrilla fighting unit. No intelligence data was found to contradict the writer's statement that he had been with noncombatants.